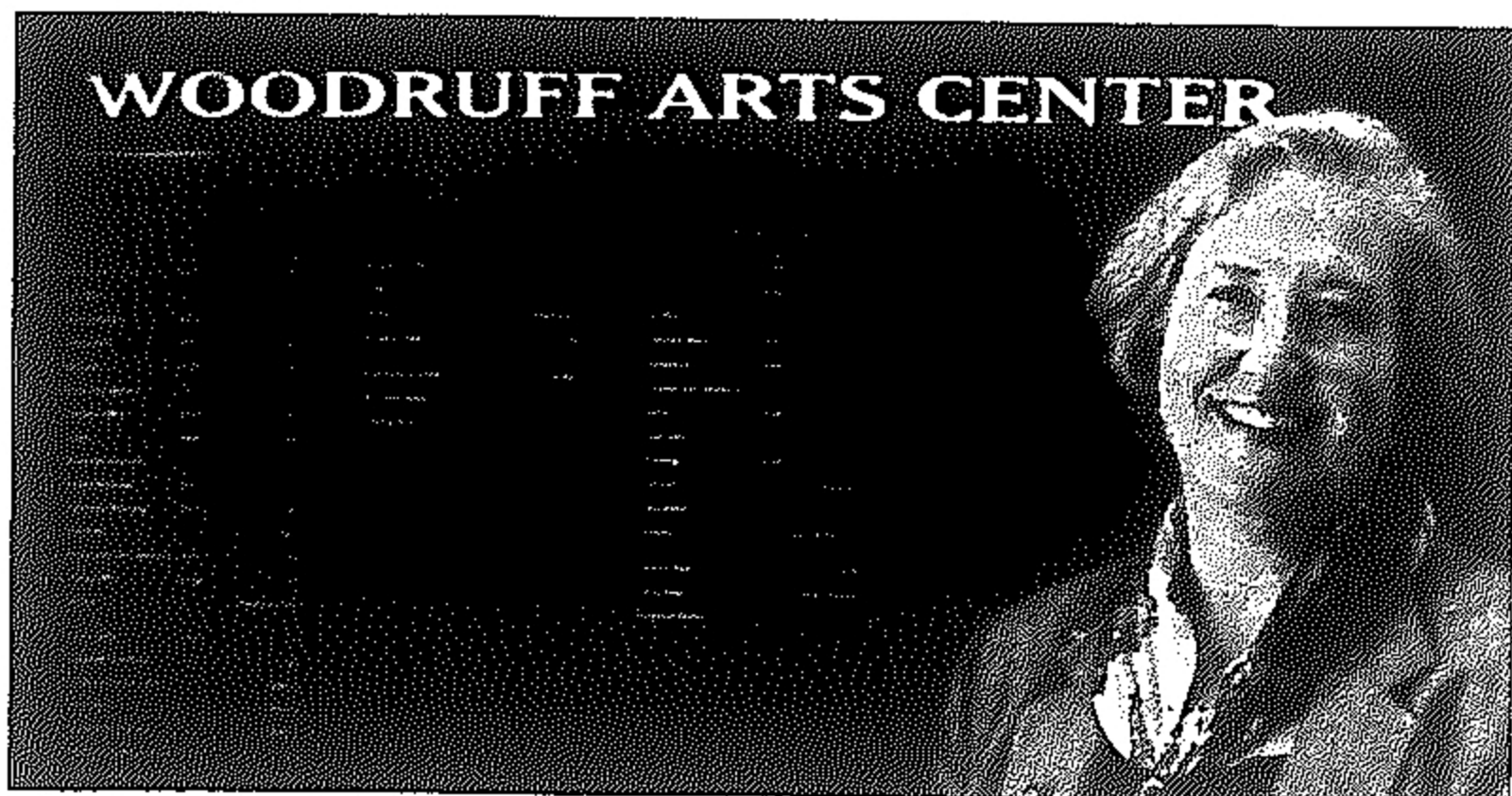


Q&A VIRGINIA HEPNER, PRESIDENT AND CEO, WOODRUFF ARTS CENTER



"Though I'm CEO, I'm not alone in any of this," said Virginia Hepner regarding Woodruff's money challenges. PHIL SKINNER / PSHINNER@AJC.COM

'Georgia should invest more in arts, culture'

New leader to look hard at Woodruff's financial landscape.

By Rosalind Bentley
rbentley@ajc.com

Today, longtime banker and arts supporter Virginia Hepner officially takes the helm of the state's largest and most prestigious arts organization, the Woodruff Arts Center.

She succeeds Joe Bankoff as president and CEO of the Woodruff. Bankoff served in the role for six years and retired last month.

A Southerner by birth (Arkansas), a border-state Mid-

westerner by rearing (Missouri), Hepner is the youngest of four children. Two of her siblings followed careers in the arts. Her brother is an architect, and one of her sisters is an art historian. Another sister was a social worker. Hepner, though interested in art, turned to finance, eventually becoming executive vice president and senior manager of U.S. corporate finance for Wachovia.

"I guess somebody had to be a capitalist in the family and that was me," said Hepner, whose portfolio now includes consulting work and a directorship at another bank.

Hepner continued on E4

'I'm not a frustrated artist'

Hepner

continued from E1

Yet the importance of participating in the arts, if not becoming a practitioner of one of the forms, was not lost on her. She has long been an arts patron, but, most importantly for the future of the Woodruff, she has been an arts administrator. She has been chair of the Metropolitan Atlanta Arts and Culture Coalition and the Metropolitan Atlanta Arts Fund and a trustee of the Savannah College of Art and Design, among other appointments. She was also a member of former Mayor Shirley Franklin's task force on public funding for the arts and was the interim executive director in 2009 for the Atlanta Ballet during construction of its \$11 million headquarters. And most recently she was interim director for the Young Audiences division at the Woodruff.

Quiet as she likes to keep it, while an undergraduate in finance at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Hepner minored in art history.

"But you would not want me to be an art historian. I'm a much better financial manager," Hepner said.

Those are the skills she will bring to bear at the Woodruff as she guides

the institution and its four divisions through rough financial waters. The Woodruff has a budget of roughly \$100 million, but has carried an annual deficit in recent years of nearly \$1.6 million. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, one of the Woodruff's four divisions, is dealing with a debt of nearly \$20 million. As for the High Museum and the Alliance Theatre, the final two of the center's divisions, Hepner said the goal is to have contributions match "our artistic ambitions, our educational ambitions." A sentiment that really applies to the entire arts center.

In a sit-down interview with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Hepner, 55, talked about her artistic philosophy and about the challenges and goals ahead.

Q: So with an art history minor you never wanted to become an artist?

A: I was born in a small town in Arkansas, 500 people, then we moved to the suburbs of Kansas City. And I was blessed to have parents who valued art. We'd go to fabulous art galleries once or twice a month. And some of my earliest memories are of watching silent films with my grandfather. I love film. But the good news is I'm not a frustrated artist. I have no talent in art, but I'm very appreciative of it. But that's not why they hired me, I'm sure.

Q: You're coming on board just as the Woodruff has also lost its executive vice president,



MEET VIRGINIA HEPNER

Position: President and CEO of the Woodruff Arts Center, Georgia's largest arts organization

Age: 55

Home state: Arkansas

Family: husband, Malcolm Barnes; son, Alec Barnes, 20; daughter, Vanessa Barnes, 16

In her downtime: Plays golf, tennis, loves to travel, enjoys all artistic disciplines

Beauchamp Carr, the institution's chief corporate fundraiser for 35 years. He was helping to bring in \$8 million to \$9 million a year from the annual corporate campaign. What impact is his retirement going to have on continuity?

A: Beauchamp helped raise \$177 million in his career. But it wasn't just the numbers but his unequivocal passion for the institution. And with any change it gives you an opportunity to review

the landscape of how it's done and to get feedback from donors about what's the opportunity to increase [the amount they contribute to the fund]. I can tell you right now the fund needs to be bigger.

Q: How much bigger?

A: Our artistic aspirations, the educational aspirations, those ambitions are much higher than we're actually able to do now. Nine million dollars is fantastic support, but it's not enough to achieve our ambitions and to do the everyday duty of keeping the building where it needs to be. I would love to have multiples of it. I'm sure we could put it to good use if we doubled it. I'd be thrilled if we did that.

Q: The Woodruff has carried a deficit the last few years of around \$1.6 million. What are your plans to eliminate that?

A: I'm a zero-based budget kind of person. I'm going to understand every aspect of what our cost structure is and take a fresh look to determine what are the things we have to do and what are those discretionary items and how can we be more efficient? How can we increase our revenue?

Q: You have four divisions with different artistic missions, but is there duplication in those areas where you might seek efficiencies?

A: It's a false assumption that nonprofits are not particularly well run. I don't actually think there's as much duplication as people think. The

Woodruff has already consolidated functions that make sense. I think people would be surprised at how efficiently things are run. So I think it's more a question of prioritization. Are we working as smart as we can collectively on things that make sense whether it's facilities management or catering?

Q: The symphony has a daunting deficit, just a few thousand dollars short of \$20 million. How do you begin to chip away at it without compromising the mission?

A: The good news is that even though I'm CEO, I'm not alone in any of this. There's a great team that has been working on this and I know the general strategy of it. But what I do know is that it's an industry issue. It's not an Atlanta Symphony Orchestra issue. Orchestras across America are facing structural deficits. Orchestras are very expensive. Now, all of us are committed to having a great orchestra, but it has to be in a financially sustainable manner.

Q: So no new symphony hall in the near or far future?

A: I can't answer that, (laughs) but our priority is we have to get it financially sustainable. And don't forget, the world has changed a lot since 2008. (Laughs) So that's an opportunity to readjust our thinking on what we do and how we do it. But I can tell you we're dedicated to sustainability, having a fabulous orchestra, and then doing whatever we need to do